

HISTORY | DECEMBER 2024

# The Feminist Who Inspired the Witches of Oz

The untold story of suffragist Matilda Gage, the woman behind the curtain whose life story captivated her son-in-law L. Frank Baum as he wrote his classic novel



Illustration by Emily Lankiewicz / Images via Universal Pictures; RGR Collection, Alamy Stock Photo; Jimlop Collection, Alamy Stock Photo; Silver Screen Collection / Getty Images; Matthew Peyton / Getty Images; Frank Micelotta / Getty Images



Every living generation has been petrified by *The Wizard of Oz*. Early in the 1939 film, a cranky neighbor riding her bicycle through a tornado suddenly transforms into a witch. She soars off on her broomstick, tilting her head back and screaming with laughter as her cloak billows out behind her.

The 1900 book by L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, inspired the film's theme of good and evil sorcery. All the witches in the story have magical powers. They can fly, materialize at will, and see all things far and near. But while the Witches of the North and South are kind and supportive, the Witches of the East and West are seen as evil. "Remember that the Witch is Wicked—tremendously Wicked—and ought to be killed," the Great Oz bellows to Dorothy as she heads off to the west.

The backstories of the Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda the Good are the subject of the upcoming movie *Wicked*, based on Gregory Maguire's 1995 novel and Winnie Holzman and Stephen Schwartz's 2003 stage musical. The witch, who is unnamed in *The Wizard of Oz*, has a name in *Wicked*: Elphaba, an homage to the initials of L. Frank Baum. (His first name, which he rarely used, was Lyman.) But the real-life backstory of the witches of Oz is just as fascinating. It involves a hidden hero of the 19th-century women's rights movement and the most powerful woman in Baum's life: his mother-in-law, Matilda Electa Joslyn Gage.

It was likely at Gage's urging that Baum began submitting his poems and stories to magazines. Gage even suggested putting a cyclone in a children's story. But she was a notable figure in her own right. As one of the three

principal leaders of the women's rights movement, along with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gage was known for her radical views and confrontational approach. At the Statue of Liberty's unveiling in 1886, she showed up on a cattle barge with a megaphone, shouting that it was "a gigantic lie, a travesty and a mockery" to portray liberty as a woman when actual American women had so few rights.

After male critics branded Gage as satanic and a heretic, she became an expert on the subject of witch hunts. Her 1893 manifesto *Woman, Church and State* chronicled the five centuries between 1300 and 1800 when tens of thousands of human beings, mostly women, were accused of witchcraft and put to death by fire, hanging, torture, drowning or stoning. In one gruesome scene, she described 400 women burning at once in a French public square "for a crime which never existed save in the imagination of those persecutors and which grew in their imagination from a false belief in woman's extraordinary wickedness."





In a still image from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy looks out the window to see her meddling neighbor transformed into the cackling Wicked Witch of the West. LANDMARK MEDIA / Alamy Stock

Gage died two years before the publication of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, a story that produced the most enduring image of female wickedness in American history. But Baum also introduced the world to a different kind of witch. It was the beautiful and benevolent Glinda, likely inspired by Matilda herself, who showed Dorothy that she always held the power to return home.

Born March 24, 1826, Gage grew up as Matilda Joslyn north of Syracuse, New York, the only child of Helen Leslie and Hezekiah Joslyn, the town physician. The couple gave their daughter an unusual middle name, Electa—a Greek word that meant “elected” or “chosen one.”

Hezekiah Joslyn was a freethinker who taught his daughter that wisdom comes through one's experiences. Freethinkers of 17th-century Europe challenged church authority, demanding the end of medieval witch hunts. Many of those backing the American Revolution also called themselves freethinkers, including Thomas Paine, whose 1776 pamphlet, *Common Sense*, helped instigate independence from England.

Gage's parents were staunch abolitionists whose home was a station on the Underground Railroad. Escaped enslaved people hid under the floorboards of the kitchen. Gage was home-schooled in Greek, mathematics and physiology. At age 15, she set off for the Clinton Liberal Institute, a boarding school that promised an education free of religious dogma. At 18, she married Henry Gage, a merchant and store owner, and they settled in the Syracuse suburb of Fayetteville, where three of their four children were born in the 1840s. Their youngest daughter, Maud, arrived in 1861.



Gage in the 1850s. Courtesy of Matilda Joslyn Gage Center

Haunted by injustice, Gage only grew fiercer in her thinking. She was furious at an America failing to live up to the ideal of liberty for all expressed in the Declaration of Independence. She was unable to leave her children at home to travel 60 miles to the inaugural 1848 National Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. But by 1852, when the third convention came to city hall in Syracuse, she was ready to speak her mind to the crowd of 2,000. "There will be a long moral warfare before the citadel yields," Gage proclaimed. "In the meantime, let us



take possession of the outposts. ... Fear not any attempt to frown down the revolution."

Afterward, Gage found herself locked in a war of words with religious leaders. One local minister called the convention "satanic," while another denounced the women as "infidels."

After the Civil War, the leaders of the movement formed the National Woman Suffrage Association, with Stanton as president, Anthony as secretary and Gage as chair of the executive committee. On Election Day, 1872, Anthony was arrested and jailed for voting. Gage was by her friend's side for the trial in Rochester. The judge was "a small-brained, pale-faced, prim-looking man," Gage wrote. "With remarkable forethought, he had penned his decision before hearing" the case. The resulting publicity made Susan B. Anthony a household name.

In 1876, a six-month celebration of the centennial of the Declaration of Independence attracted nearly ten million Americans—roughly a quarter of the entire U.S. population—to Philadelphia. The activists petitioned President Grant to make a declaration of their own at the opening ceremony. The request was denied. That wouldn't stop the suffragists.

At the ceremony, Anthony, Gage and three other leaders lurked behind the press section. Gage clutched a three-foot scroll and marched through the crowd of 150,000 people toward the



After struggling to support his family on the Midwestern plains, Baum found success with

podium. She passed the document to Anthony, who then placed it into the hands of the master of ceremonies, announcing: "We present to you this Declaration of the Rights of the Women Citizens of the United States." Before the guards could catch them, the suffragists quickly handed out printed copies of the declaration to the reporters in the crowd:

his Oz series. The first book was an instant best seller in 1900, and the 13 sequels kept him busy until his death in 1919. Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

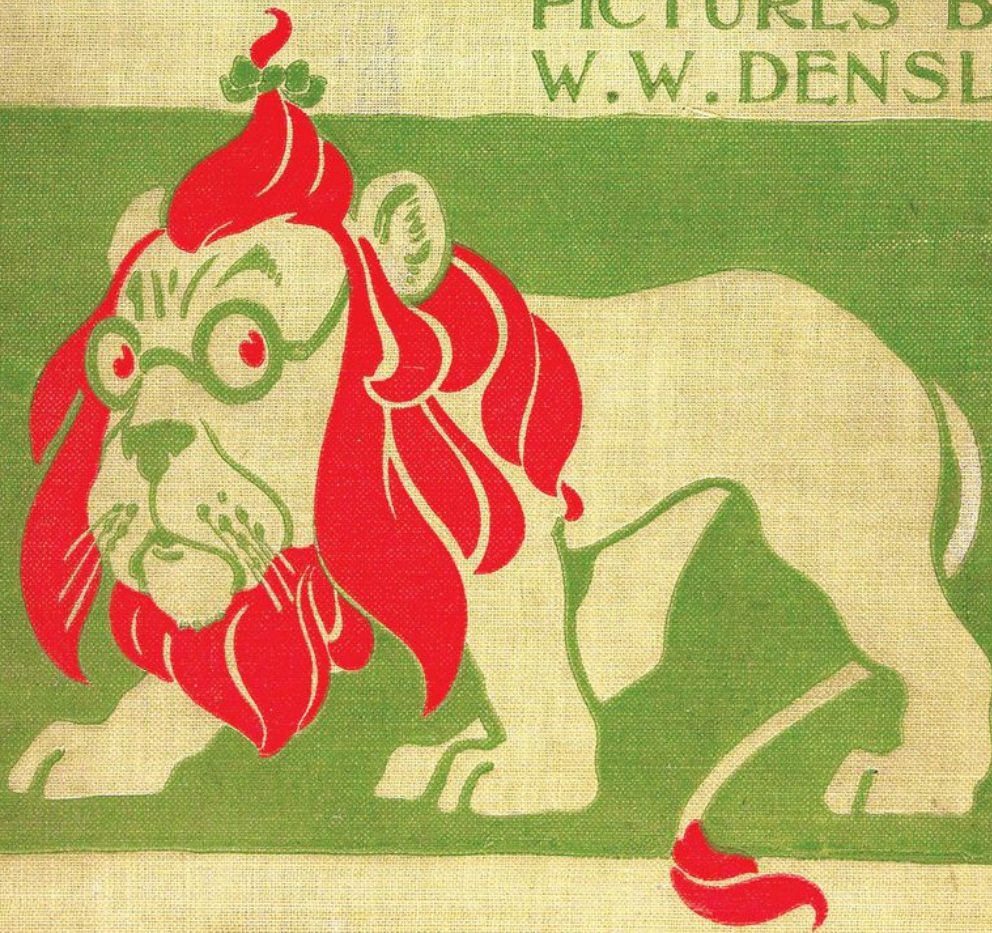
*"The women of the United States, denied for one hundred years the only means of self-government—the ballot—are political slaves, with greater cause for discontent, rebellion and revolution, than the men of 1776. ... We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all the civil and political rights that belong to citizens of the United States be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever."*

Afterward, the women decided to record their struggles in a book, which eventually ballooned to comprise six volumes. The mammoth undertaking took a decade to finish. Most of the labor was split between Stanton and Gage, who completed the *History of Woman Suffrage*, Volume I, in 1881.



# The WONDER- FUL WIZARD of OZ

BY  
L. FRANK BAUM  
PICTURES BY  
W. W. DENSLOW



Artist William Denslow shared the copyright for the first Oz book and was crucial to its success. As Denslow later said, he had to "work out and invent characters, costumes and a multitude of other



The book's publication coincided with Maud Gage's freshman year at Cornell, the first Ivy League university to become coeducational. Maud resided in the female dormitory, Sage College, a magnificent brick building that still stands on the Ithaca, New York, campus. One Saturday evening in February 1881, the young women of Sage were treated to a lecture by Maud's mother on the subject of women's suffrage. "A large audience greeted Mrs. Gage on Saturday evening," reported the *Cornell Daily Sun*. "Her discourse was well received."

Still, Maud had a difficult time at school, left out of social clubs and mocked by college boys. "Her name is Gage and she is lively," her schoolmate Jessie Mary Boulton wrote home in a letter. "A girl scarcely dares look sideways here. I came to the conclusion long ago that Cornell is no place for lively girls." When Boulton co-founded a new chapter of Kappa Alpha Theta, the first sorority on an Ivy League campus, Maud was not on the membership rolls. Boulton also joined the Lawn Tennis Club for ladies, again without Maud.

But fate would have its way: The 20-year-old student shared her room with a girl from Syracuse named Josie Baum, who introduced Maud to her cousin Frank, a 25-year-old bachelor, at a family party on Christmas Eve. At the time, Frank Baum was a failed chicken farmer who was writing and starring in his own touring stage plays. The two hit it off, and after a proper period of Victorian-era courtship, Baum proposed marriage.

At first, Gage called her daughter "a darned fool" for wanting to drop out of college to marry this itinerant playwright and actor, a most disreputable profession. Yet a wedding date was set for November 1882. With a string quartet playing, the wedding took place at the Greek Revival home of the Gage family. "The promises required of the bride were precisely the same as those required of the groom," noted a local newspaper, in apparent surprise. (At the

time, it was standard for the bride, but not the groom, to promise to “love and obey.”)

Now a designated New York State commemorative landmark owned and operated by the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation, the Gage House serves as a museum and dialogue center hosting programs on social justice led by progressive scholars and activists. One of its advisory board members, feminist icon Gloria Steinem, called Gage “the woman who was ahead of the women who were ahead of their time.”

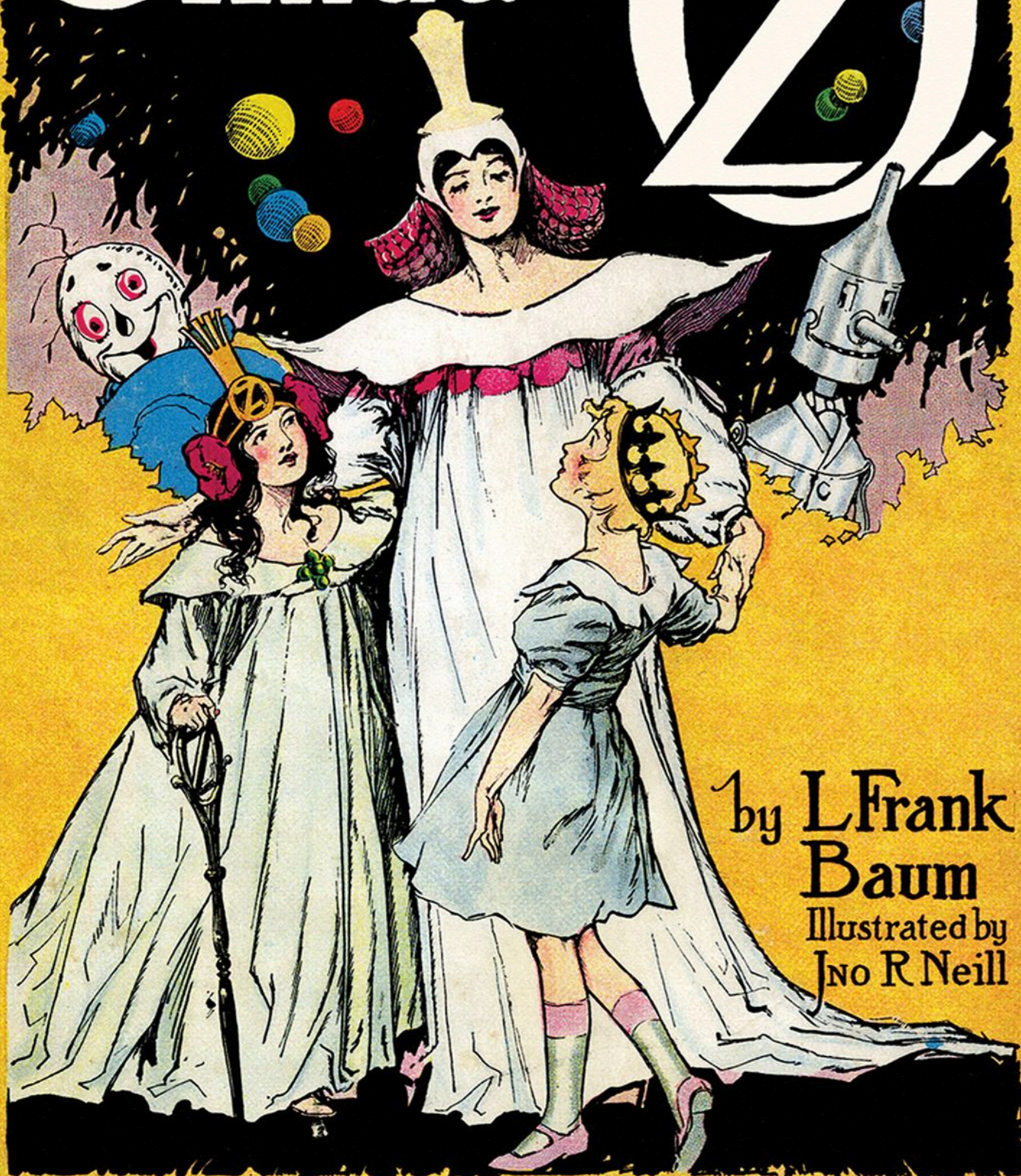
After the September 1884 death of her gentle and solemn husband Henry—an inspiration for the character of Uncle Henry in *The Wizard of Oz*—Gage threw herself even more fully into her work. Among many other projects, she’d been collaborating with Anthony and Stanton on the first two volumes of the *History of Woman Suffrage*. In the mid-1880s, though, Anthony came into some money and took over the rights to the series herself, paying Gage and Stanton for their shares.





# Glinda of

# OZ



by L Frank  
Baum  
Illustrated by  
Jno R Neill



Meanwhile, Gage was increasingly frustrated by the more conservative leanings of her fellow suffragist leaders. Anthony, in particular, had strong ties with the temperance movement, which blamed alcohol for the bad behavior of men but also had an overtly religious vision for national politics.

Gage disapproved of the alliance between the women's suffrage movement and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which began in 1874. In 1890, Gage left the National Woman Suffrage Association and founded the Woman's National Liberal Union, which fought for the separation of church and state and drew attention to the religious subjugation of women.

As for the young Baums, Frank and Maud rented a house in Syracuse and had the first of their four sons. The new dad brought in steady money as the superintendent and sales manager for Baum's (pronounced Bom's) Castorine Company, a family business that created lubricants for buggies and machinery, a firm that still operates out of Rome, New York. Despite the outfit's success, Baum grew bored. Yet he would never forget his days selling cans of oil, making the item a must-have for the Tin Woodman, who always needs a few drips to avoid rust.



In the 1939 film, the Kansas scenes are sepia-toned, but the Oz scenes were filmed using a new process called three-strip Technicolor. World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Gage corresponded regularly with her son and two other daughters who had settled in the Dakota Territory, joining half a million other Easterners catching "Western fever." As Baum heard about their lives, he yearned for a more adventurous one. Relocating with his family in 1888 to the new "Hub City" of Aberdeen, in what became South Dakota, he established a novelty shop on its main street called Baum's Bazaar. The store failed in just 15 months, as Baum misjudged the clientele, focusing on frivolous toys and games and impractical items like parasols and fancy wicker. "Frank had let his tastes run riot," wrote sister-in-law Helen, who picked up the leftover inventory for \$772.54 but turned her family's store, renamed Gage's Bazaar, into a success by selling things people actually needed.



Around the time Baum closed the store in December 1889, Matilda Gage blew in from the East to visit. She'd stay with the Baums every winter for the rest of her life. By early spring, Gage decided that she'd be remaining for the rest of the year. She and her band of suffragists convinced legislators to hold a referendum in the new state of South Dakota on the right to vote for women.



Delegates came to Washington, D.C., from nine different countries for the first meeting of the International Council of Women in 1888. A portrait of conference leaders shows Gage seated, second from right. Susan B. Anthony is seated second from left, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton is seated fourth from left. LOC / Corbis / VCG via Getty Images

Baum put his remaining cash into another distressed business, buying the weakest newspaper in a town that had several bigger ones. His first editorials for the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* were high-minded. "The key to the success of

our country is tolerance," he wrote. "The 'live and let live' policy of the Americans has excited the admiration of the world." Volunteering as secretary of Aberdeen's Women's Suffrage Society, Baum argued that a law giving women the vote was more likely out there, as the West was new and open-minded. Gage barnstormed the state as Baum published editorials: "We are engaged in an equal struggle," Baum wrote. In the West, he added, "a woman delights in being useful; a young lady's highest ambition is to become a breadwinner."

This inclusive spirit was often found in Baum's early editorials. But on November 4, 1890, everything he advocated was shot down in the election. Baum had written a clever poem endorsing the town of Huron as the new state's capital. The voters chose Pierre. And at the end of the day, the male voters of South Dakota broke 2 to 1 against the right of women to vote. Aberdeen had also just faced a drought and massive crop failure that crushed its economy. Failing farmers and merchants were heading back East or on to other boomtowns out West, leaving Baum with worthless credit slips and unpaid expenses.

That drought was felt even more harshly 150 miles away at Standing Rock, the Sioux reservation, where the community of several thousand began to suffer from starvation. As part of a well-documented propaganda campaign fueled by the U.S. military, newswire reports warned that an uprising and massacre of the people of Aberdeen was coming. At first Baum tried keeping his readers cool and sensible about this "false and senseless scare." On November 29, he wrote: "According to the popular rumor, the Indians were expected to drop in on us any day the last week. But as our scalps are still in healthy condition, it is needless for us to remark that we are yet alive."

Baum lambasted his rival newspapers for printing the worst of the propaganda and racism in order to sell newspapers. "Probably papers who have so injured the state by their flashy headlines of Indian uprisings did not think of the



results of such action beyond the extra sale of a few copies of their sheets," Baum continued in his November 29 editorial.

When U.S. officials ordered the arrest of Chief Sitting Bull in mid-December, newspapers all over the country reported that violence was likely to break out. Baum got caught up in the issue. "A man in the East can read the papers and light a cigar and say there is no danger," he wrote, "but put that man and his family on the east bank of the Missouri, opposite Sitting Bull's camp ... he will draw a different picture."

After police invaded Sitting Bull's camp on December 15 and shot him as he was trying to escape, wire reports went out far and wide, and Baum printed the headline on December 20: "Expect an Attack at Any Moment. Sitting Bull's Death to Be Avenged by a Massacre of Whites in the Near Future." In this same issue, Baum printed his first of two racist editorials. Dehumanizing the Native Americans as "whining curs" and "miserable wretches," he called for "the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians." On December 29, as many as 300 Sioux men, women and children camping by a creek called Wounded Knee were shot dead by U.S. soldiers. Baum's editorials put him on the wrong side of history.



Maud Gage at Cornell in the 1880s. Over her mother's objections, she dropped out to marry Baum and travel with his theater troupe. Courtesy of Matilda Joselyn Gage Center

There's no known written record of Gage's response to this incident. She was living with the Baums at the time, so any exchanges she had with Frank would



have happened face-to-face. But his editorials were certainly at odds with her own views. She had the utmost respect for Indigenous communities. After paying several visits to an Iroquois Confederation north of Syracuse, she had concluded that the sexes there were “nearly equal,” and “never was justice more perfect, never civilization higher.” In 1893, she would become an honorary member of the Wolf Clan of the Mohawk Nation and, at the ceremony, receive the name of Ka-ron-ien-ha-wi, roughly translated as She Who Holds the Sky.

By January 1891, Baum seemed to have lost almost everything, including his integrity. His newspaper business collapsed. At the age of 34, he had no job, no career, no prospects, only a damaged reputation.

That spring, the Baum family moved to Chicago, where Frank got a job working for the city's *Evening Post*. In this new chapter of his life, he accompanied his mother-in-law to lectures, séances and other gatherings. In September 1892, he became a member of a group called the Theosophical Society. Founded in New York City, the society was led by the Russian mystic Madame Helena Blavatsky. Matilda, a freethinker like her father, had joined the society at a conference in Rochester, New York, in March 1885. The brew of Theosophical beliefs appealed to Gage—the ancient wisdom of Hinduism and Buddhism, combined with other mystical ideas like mediumship and telepathy—and all of it with an emphasis on universal human rights and living a life of nonviolence in both word and deed. A mission statement published by the group's founders in 1882 defined Theosophy as “a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed or color.” Gage called Theosophy the “crown blessing” of her life.

Baum was especially interested in Theosophy's description of the astral plane, a world of emotion and illusion where one's “astral body” could go for a supernatural experience reached through mental powers. An 1895 book called

*The Astral Plane: Its Scenery, Inhabitants and Phenomena* would become so popular in the family that three copies would circulate among the Baum and Gage households.



Gage's painting of a hyacinth. At a time when mainstream pharmacists used ingredients like mercury and arsenic, Gage made her own plant remedies. Courtesy of Matilda Joslyn Gage Center

In 1893, Gage published *Woman, Church and State*, her most influential work. Gage called it “a book with a revolution in it.” The 450-page volume put forth the provocative view that church and state had been suppressing women for centuries. The book was banned by her nemesis, Anthony Comstock, a U.S. postal inspector and the secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, who called it “salacious” and declared he would bring criminal proceedings against any person who placed it in a public school or sent it through the U.S. mail.

Gage cited passages from the King James Bible, such as “though shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18),

showing the link between the preaching of religion and accusations of witchcraft. She traced this misogyny back to the Garden of Eden with the tale of Eve, the trickster serpent and the forbidden fruit. “A system of religion was adopted which taught the greater sinfulness of women,” she asserted, “and the persecution for witchcraft became chiefly directed against women.”

As this view gained traction within the church, Gage wrote, “a witch was held to be a woman who had deliberately sold herself to the evil one.” Anything could be used as evidence of witchcraft—possessing rare knowledge, having an

unusual “witch mark,” suffering from mental illness, owning black cats, the use of herbs for healing, performing black magic, or having an ability to float or swim. But “those condemned as sorcerers and witches, as ‘heretics,’ were in reality the most advanced thinkers of the christian ages,” Gage wrote.

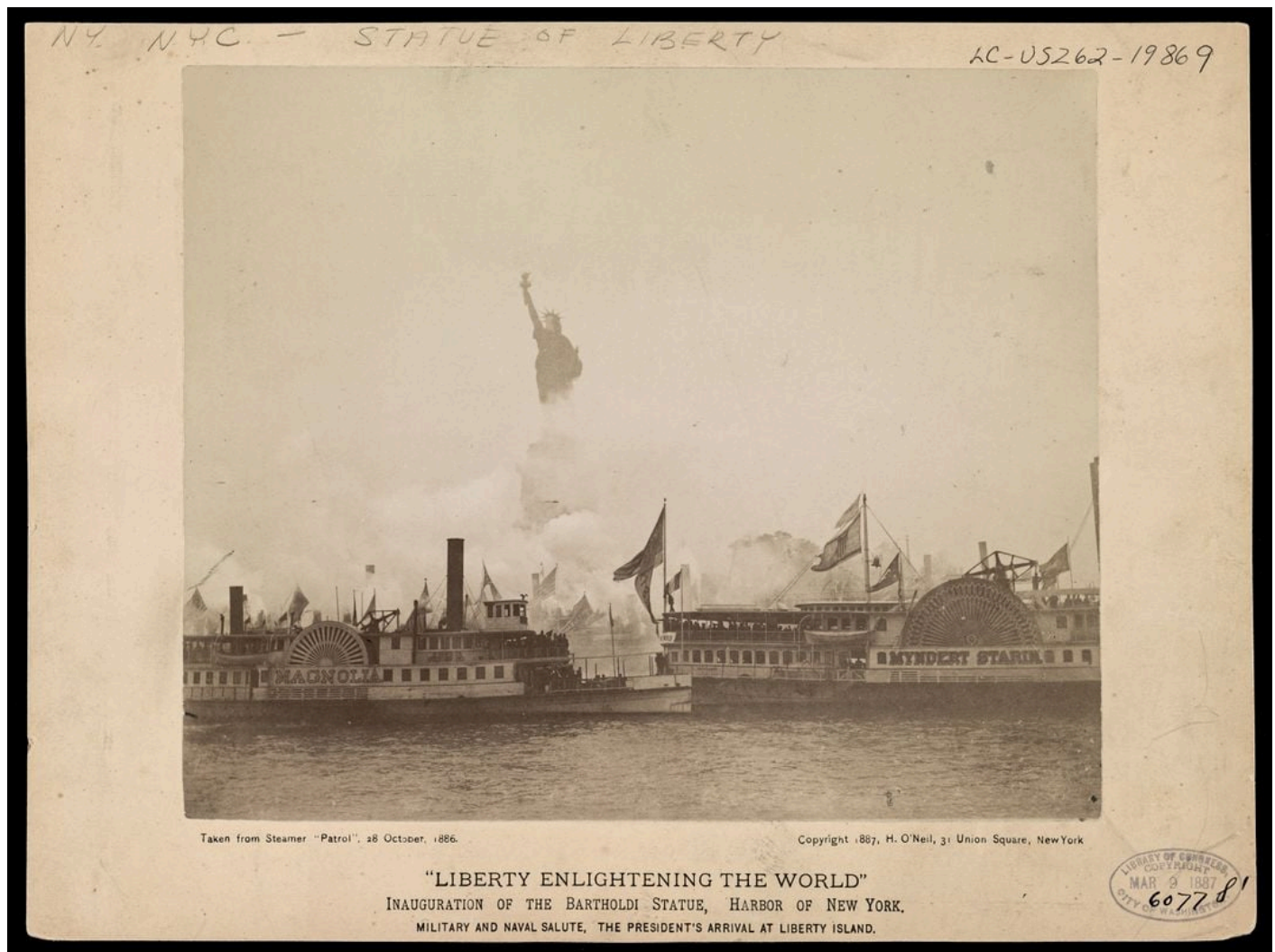
She was especially moved by an 1883 gathering in Salem, Massachusetts, for descendants of Rebecca Nurse, one of the best-known women put to death in the Salem witch trials of 1692. Nurse was a 70-year-old woman with eight children and, as Gage wrote, “a church member of unsullied reputation and devout habit; but all these considerations did not prevent her accusation ... and she was hung by the neck till she was dead.”

Gage was promoting her new book when she visited the 1893 Columbian Exposition, a spectacular world’s fair in Chicago. Her son-in-law was covering the sprawling event as a reporter, and he wrote about the light pouring through the walls of windows of the white buildings, so bright that people purchased colored eyeshades from vendors. This detail would later reappear in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, where all the residents of the Emerald City wear green eyeshades. “Because if you did not wear spectacles the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind you,” Baum would write in the novel. Indeed, the Oz novel’s illustrations would be sketched by William Wallace Denslow, who was drawing splendorous images of the fair’s fanciful architecture for another Chicago paper.

One day, Gage visited the exposition’s Woman’s Building and encountered statues immortalizing her old colleagues Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Seeing the statues only increased her ire at her old colleagues for aligning with the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. She also felt undervalued as a writer, and she harbored suspicions that Anthony had taken funds from a joint account to pay her own exorbitant travel expenses. “They have stabbed me in reputation, and Susan, at least, has stolen money from



me," she wrote in a July 1893 letter to her son, Thomas. "They are traitors, also, to woman's highest needs."



A military salute at the Statue of Liberty's 1886 dedication. From a nearby barge, Gage shouted through a megaphone about the lack of liberty for American women. Library of Congress

Gage herself was falling into poverty. The cost of publishing and promoting her new book had exceeded its earnings, and she was now in debt. "I like an active life and one with freedom from money troubles," Gage wrote. "I like to be independent in every way. But fate or Karma is against me."

In February of 1895, Gage came across a writing contest in the children's magazine *The Youth's Companion* offering a prize of \$500 for the best original story. The rich sum (equivalent to more than \$18,000 today) seized her

attention, and she considered her daughter Helen and son-in-law Frank the family's best writers. While there are no known records of her in-person conversations with Frank, she likely shared the same ideas she sent Helen in a letter. "Keep in mind it is not a child's paper but a paper for youth and the older members of the family," she wrote. "The moral tone and literary character of these stories must be exceptional."

She encouraged them to write "not narration or passages from history, but stories," which she defined as tales with "a dramatic arc from the beginning to the end." Gage went so far as to suggest a topic: "If you could get up a series of adventures or a Dakota blizzard adventure where a heroic teacher saves children's lives." Or, she added, "bring in a cyclone," perhaps recalling a true twister story of a house rising off its foundation that Helen had written in the *Syracuse Weekly Express* in 1887. Above all, Gage added, create "fiction which comes with a moral, without however any attempt to sermonize."

There's no evidence that Baum entered that particular contest, but around that time, he began a new routine. He'd moved on to a new day job as a traveling salesman of fine china for Pitkin & Brooks. Every evening, especially when he was away at hotels, he'd write down ideas in a journal. Soon, Baum began submitting his tales and poems to newspapers and magazines. At first, Baum kept track of his rejection letters in a journal called his "Record of Failure," a title that could have described his whole business career, too.

But in early 1896, Baum started receiving acceptance letters for his short stories. In January 1896, the *Chicago Times-Herald* published a story of his titled "Who Called Perry?" In February, the same paper published his story "Yesterday at the Exposition," which imagined a world's fair in Chicago nearly 200 years in the future. His first national magazine story was called "The Extravagance of Dan" and published in the *National* magazine in May 1897.





Sioux bodies wrapped in blankets at Chief Spotted Elk's camp, soon after the U.S. Army killed as many as 300 Sioux. Baum's editorials were part of the wave of fearmongering surrounding the massacre. Trager and Kuhn, LOC

Once his submissions started getting accepted, the stories kept coming, typically turning real life into the poetic. With both earnings and confidence rising, Baum expanded his vision to two successful books for children, *Mother Goose in Prose* (1897), a collection of short stories based on traditional nursery rhymes, and *Father Goose: His Book* (1899), a series of original nonsense poems. In October 1899, he got a story called "Aunt Hulda's Good Time" into the magazine first suggested by his mother-in-law, the prestigious *Youth's Companion*.

For the first time, the Baums were able to afford a stately home, a Victorian on Humboldt Boulevard wired with electric lights and featuring a covered front porch where Baum would tell stories to his sons and the neighborhood children. He maintained a close relationship with his mother-in-law. "Frank came in and kissed me goodbye, as he always does," wrote Gage. "He is very kind to me."

Gage was staying with the Baums in Chicago when she was confined to bed with pain in her lungs, throat and stomach. "We all must die, and I pray to go quickly when I leave," she wrote in an 1897 letter. "I would a thousand times prefer Black Death to long-term paralysis. ... The real suffering comes from lack of knowledge of real things—the spiritual."

In Washington, D.C., thousands of activists were gathering for a convention to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Seneca Falls conference. Unable to attend, Gage penned a final speech that was read aloud at the convention by a friend. Gage proclaimed what she called "the femininity of the divine" and shared her belief that one day "the feminine will soon be fully restored to its rightful place in creation."

Gage also wrote messages to her loved ones and colleagues as part of her last will and testament. "I am one of those that are set for the redeeming of the Earth," Gage wrote to Baum. "I am to live on the plane that shall be above all things that dishearten. ... When I receive instructions from those who are in the Invisible, I will receive them willingly, with a desire to put them into practice to the extent of my spirit light and potency."

Matilda Electa Joslyn Gage died on March 18, 1898. Her four-paragraph obituary in the *New York Times* reported her death was caused by "apoplexy," an old medical term for a stroke but also meaning a state of extreme rage.



Following a small ceremony for her mother in Chicago, Maud left her husband behind with their four sons and transported the urn of her mother's remains east, to be interred by the old house in Fayetteville alongside her father's grave.



During the 1910s, the Baums lived in Hollywood—in a house called Ozcot, with a dog named Toto. Baum designed an emerald- green lighting system for the dining room. Courtesy of Matilda Joslyn Gage Center

This is when the magic happened. The story “moved right in and took possession,” Baum later said. The inspiration came at the twilight of a winter’s day when he saw his sons and their friends returning home from playing in the snow. “It came to me right out of the blue,” he said. “I shooed the children away.” Word paintings came out through his pencil onto scraps of paper: A gray prairie. A terrifying twister. A mystical land ruled by both good and wicked witches. A trio of comical characters who join a girl on her quest, a journey to a

magical city of emeralds controlled by a mysterious wizard. "The story really seemed to write itself," he told his publisher. Yet at first, Baum hadn't settled on a name for his main character.

In June 1898, Maud's brother and wife welcomed a girl they named Dorothy. Maud enjoyed visiting them in Bloomington, Illinois, that summer, but the baby became ill and started running fevers. On November 11, only 5 months old, Dorothy Louise Gage died. She was "a perfectly beautiful baby," Maud mourned. "I could have taken her for my very own and loved her devotedly." In Baum's writings, the girl from Kansas took on the name Dorothy, with a last name, Gale, that was perhaps a double reference to the gale-force cyclone and the family name of Gage.

His mother-in-law also lived on through the story. She'd believed strongly in mental manifestation, insisting that people could accomplish anything through the power of their minds. When Helen's daughter Leslie fell ill in 1895, Gage had prescribed positive thought energy: "Take five minutes three or four times a day to think of health and when you go to bed at night keep saying to yourself 'I am well.' Grandma knows by experience that a great deal of good comes from concentration of thought." As a woman who spent her whole life urging women to have confidence in themselves, Gage would have been pleased to see her views taking on a central role in the story of Oz. Dorothy's silver shoes (in the movie ruby slippers) are not magical in themselves. It's only after a lesson from Glinda on the power of thought that their magic can work. As the good witch Glinda tells Dorothy: "All you have to do is to knock the heels together three times and command the shoes to carry you wherever you wish to go."

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## **Evan I. Schwartz**

Los Angeles-based writer Evan I. Schwartz is the author of five nonfiction books including *Finding Oz: How L. Frank Baum Discovered the Great American Story*.

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